

## Chapter 8

# Race–Specific Advertising on Commercial Websites: Effects of Ethnically Ambiguous Computer Generated Characters in a Digital World

**Osei Appiah**

*The Ohio State University, USA*

**Troy Elias**

*University of Florida, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Avatars and anthropomorphic characters by marketers are becoming more commonplace on commercial web sites. Moreover, a trend among marketers is to use ethnically ambiguous models in advertising to appeal to specific consumer segments. This study helps our understanding of not only how best to segment and appeal to racially diverse consumers but how people interact with virtual human agents in relationship to the literature on audience response to real humans. It was predicted that Blacks would respond more positively to a Black agent, than they would to either a White agent or an ethnically ambiguous agent. It was also expected that Whites would show no difference in their response based on the race of the computer agent. The findings demonstrate that Blacks had more positive attitudes toward a computer agent, had more positive attitudes toward a web site and recalled more product information from a site when the site featured a Black agent vis-à-vis a White agent. Whites showed no significant response difference concerning the agent, the brand or the site based on the racial composition of the computer agents. Interestingly, the ethnically ambiguous character was overall just as effective in persuading both White and Black browsers as were the same-race agents.*

Technological advancements in computing, communication technologies and information management have significantly altered the nature of mass media within the last two decades (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). The establishment

of a virtually limitless wave of channels through increasing broadband connectivity and new technological developments has ultimately led to the ‘demassification’ of the media (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Tharp, 2001). The enhanced bi-directionality of communication by virtue of the new information age, has provided users with

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-792-8.ch008

significantly enhanced capabilities to transmit and retrieve information, especially when compared to the mass society era. Individuals now have access to information from a wide array of sources and amplified interactive access (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). In addition to this, however, users also have improved capabilities to create and contribute content themselves. Users have more control in the way content is disseminated and received, all at less financial and temporal costs than ever before (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). In the ongoing march toward media convergence the enhanced ability of users to share information with each other has led to a significant increase in interpersonal influence (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003). Particularly in today's current commercial media framework, media outlets, advertisers, and marketers are well advised that they no longer sell goods and services to individual consumers, but are actually in the business of selling goods and services to networks of customers (Rosen, 2000). Other problems faced by mass marketers in today's media environment include the resultant shrinking of traditional mass audiences, and the inability of traditional marketing efforts to capture and hold the attention of their audience.

With ever-increasing informational and interactive access (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), consumers are becoming increasingly difficult to reach and their attention equally difficult to attain much less to hold (Rosen, 2000). With so many offerings and available channels, consumers are hardly able to differentiate one company's offerings from another, particularly in e-commerce settings. This has motivated advertising agencies to develop new and innovative ways to capture the attention of their audiences.

Companies are increasing using digital media like the Internet, which offer unique features that may enhance the persuasive effects of advertising and other strategic communication efforts by allowing information to be presented in a multi-modal format that takes advantage of animation

and instantly playing audio and video—*rich media*. Companies utilizing their web sites to promote their brand can benefit from the multi-sensory interaction of sight, sound, and motion. Unlike simple text-only or text-picture appeals, commercials and video clips on the web can be better used to “convey a mood or image for a brand as well as to develop emotional or entertaining appeals that help make a dull product appear more interesting” (Belch & Belch, 2001, p. 354). The perceptually pleasing ability of digital, rich, and vividly presented information on a commercial web site may be inherently interesting, attention-getting, thought-provoking, image producing, emotionally arousing and easy to elaborate upon (Appiah, 2006; Kim, Kardes, Herr, 1989; McGill & Anand, 1989).

A particularly important way to capture audiences' attention and increase the entertainment value and customer satisfaction in virtual shopping environments is to use computer-generated characters or “avatars” on digitally rich commercial web sites (Holzwarth, Jaiszewski, & Neumann, 2006).

### **Computer-Generated Anthropomorphic Agents: Avatars and Agents**

Computer-generated anthropomorphic characters are computer agents or avatars that have been provided human traits or qualities, such as computer generated faces (Gong & Nass, 2007). Computer-generated anthropomorphic characters are frequently imbued with the ability to speak through either computer-generated speech or prerecorded natural speech (Gong & Nass, 2007). These virtual humans are a new and increasingly prominent type of digital communicator, and are being used in many capacities. For instance, virtual humans have been utilized as computer interface agents (Gong & Nass, 2007; Lee & Nass, 2002), as avatars or virtual representations

17 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/race-specific-advertising-commercial-websites/43352](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/race-specific-advertising-commercial-websites/43352)

## Related Content

---

### Lighting the Fires of Entrepreneurialism?: Constructions of Meaning in an English Inner City Academy

Philip A. Woods and Glenys J. Woods (2011). *International Journal of Technology and Educational Marketing* (pp. 1-24).

[www.irma-international.org/article/lighting-fires-entrepreneurialism/52076](http://www.irma-international.org/article/lighting-fires-entrepreneurialism/52076)

### Electronic Word of Mouth: Definitions and Concepts

Rym Srarfi Tabbane and Mohsen Debabi (2016). *Capturing, Analyzing, and Managing Word-of-Mouth in the Digital Marketplace* (pp. 1-27).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/electronic-word-of-mouth/136715](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/electronic-word-of-mouth/136715)

### The Impact of Credibility Attributes on Consumer Intention to Adopt Information on Social Networking Sites: Application to Tourism Services

Yasmeen Elsaniti, Riyadh Eid and Khaled Bedair (2022). *International Journal of Online Marketing* (pp. 1-22).

[www.irma-international.org/article/the-impact-of-credibility-attributes-on-consumer-intention-to-adopt-information-on-social-networking-sites/299393](http://www.irma-international.org/article/the-impact-of-credibility-attributes-on-consumer-intention-to-adopt-information-on-social-networking-sites/299393)

### Environmental Marketing Awareness and Consumer Purchase Behaviour: A Survey of Food and Beverage Products in Nigeria

Oseremen Ebhote and E.O. Odia (2019). *International Journal of Marketing and Sales Education* (pp. 1-11).

[www.irma-international.org/article/environmental-marketing-awareness-and-consumer-purchase-behaviour/251210](http://www.irma-international.org/article/environmental-marketing-awareness-and-consumer-purchase-behaviour/251210)

### The Impact of Social Media Platforms "Instagram" and "Snapchat" on the Purchasing Decision - Structural Equation Modelling Approach: Social Media Platforms

Eman Ali Alghamdi and Naima Bogari (2020). *International Journal of Online Marketing* (pp. 72-94).

[www.irma-international.org/article/the-impact-of-social-media-platforms-instagram-and-snapchat-on-the-purchasing-decision---structural-equation-modelling-approach/243469](http://www.irma-international.org/article/the-impact-of-social-media-platforms-instagram-and-snapchat-on-the-purchasing-decision---structural-equation-modelling-approach/243469)